

NAXOS

Franz
SCHMIDT
Symphony No. 1
Notre Dame

(Introduction, Intermezzo and Carnival Music)

Malmö Symphony Orchestra • Vassily Sinaisky



Franz Schmidt (1874–1939)

Symphony No. 1 in E major • Introduction, Intermezzo and Carnival Music from *Notre Dame*

The musician and musicologist Hans Keller once wrote that ‘As a composer, conductor, piano virtuoso, chamber-musical pianist, and string-quartet cellist, Franz Schmidt was the most complete musician I have come across in my life’. As a composer Schmidt’s posthumous reputation has been somewhat overshadowed by such names as Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner along with other Romantic symphonists. Perhaps some of the greatest damage to his standing, however, came as a result of being lauded by Nazi authorities as a composer of distinction within the ‘Ostmark’ following the Anschluss of 1938, with subsequent accusations of being a Nazi sympathiser – an allegation now largely discredited.

Of mixed Hungarian and German descent, Schmidt was born on 22nd December 1874 in the Hungarian town of Pressburg, now Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. He received early piano tuition from his mother, herself a pupil of Franz Liszt, and, while Schmidt labelled her as his best teacher, his first real musical inspiration came through the church, where he was particularly taken by the organ and church music. He had further piano tuition from Rudolf Mader, a schoolteacher, and Ludwig Burger, a former conductor, but gained more from organ and harmony lessons with the organist at the Franciscan monastery in Pressburg, Father Felician. Another vital influence was Helene von Bednarics, an arts lover with a network of creative friends who often gathered at her house. Through her Schmidt was introduced to a range of works, musicians of celebrity, including Anton Rubinstein and Hans von Bülow, and to the pianist and pedagogue Theodor Leschetizky in Vienna.

In 1889, Schmidt moved to Perchtoldsdorf near Vienna following the imprisonment of his father after an attempted fraud, when his family became impoverished. Here he obtained a post through a family friend, Hugo von Steiner, as a live-in tutor with the Griener family. In these surroundings he received encouragement to follow a career in music, and particularly to become a conductor. In the autumn of 1890 he enrolled at the Vienna Conservatory in Bruckner’s harmony class and as a cello student.

When Schmidt left the Conservatory in 1896 he won a place in the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra as a cellist, thus automatically becoming a member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Under such names as Hans Richter and Robert Fuchs, he performed a wide range of operas and orchestral music and, with the arrival of Mahler as conductor and then director in 1897, Schmidt became the favoured cellist, often leading and playing solos, despite not being section principal. An ongoing feud with the orchestra’s leader led to him falling out of favour with Mahler from around 1901, and Schmidt was eventually to forgo his desire to be section principal, spending his remaining decade in the orchestra on the back desks. During these years Schmidt established his position as cello professor from 1902 to 1908 at the Conservatory of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, and from 1914 as professor of piano at what was now the Vienna Academy for Music and Performing Arts, from 1918 the Staatsakademie, positions which would eventually allow him to leave the orchestra and concentrate on composition.

While Schmidt’s career was to progress further, writing most of his output after this point and also serving as director of the then Staatsakademie and from 1927 to 1931 as rector of the short-lived Fachhochschule formed from it, his private life was dogged with misfortune that prevented any lasting happiness in the remainder of his life. Severe mental illness saw his first wife detained in a mental hospital from 1919 – she was murdered under Nazi laws of euthanasia in 1942 – and his daughter Emma died during childbirth in 1932, which led Schmidt to suffer a breakdown. As a result of ill-health, Schmidt retired from the Musikhochschule in 1937 and lived only two years more until 11th February 1939.

Schmidt’s development as a composer was slow and, from the body of his work it appears that he was a relatively late starter in the field. Focus, however, should be on quality rather than quantity, particularly with the destruction of a number of early works, and his final output contains four symphonies, two piano concertos for the left hand, a number of orchestral works, chamber music, a few

piano pieces and a number of organ works. Certainly one of his best-known works, however, is the oratorio *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (The Book with Seven Seals), based on the Revelation of St John. Composed between 1935 and 1937, the oratorio had its première in Vienna two months after the Anschluss, an association that, while diminished, is near impossible to discard.

By the time he had left the opera orchestra in 1911 Schmidt had seen success as a composer with the completion of his *Symphony No. 1* in 1899 and of his opera *Notre Dame* in 1904, but wider recognition did not come until after this point. In his autobiographical sketch Schmidt relates a tale of how orchestral musicians were viewed as second-rate, when at a musical *soirée* the wealthy lady of the house told him that ‘... you are unfortunately not an artist by profession, but simply a musician in the opera orchestra!’ It was partly these kinds of frustrations that led to his eventual departure from the orchestra, jettisoning all benefits, including his pension. The opera *Notre Dame* also faced difficulties and, following various struggles, it was not accepted for performance until 1914, ten years after its completion.

Schmidt was not completely ignored, however, and his *Symphony No. 1 in E major* received a prize from the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, and was given its première in Vienna by the Konzertvereinorchester on 25th January 1902 conducted by the composer. The work was well received, which aided the ‘... efforts to make me unpopular with Mahler’ – as Schmidt himself described it – during the cello section leadership dispute. He goes on to say how ‘... I had already had my first success as a symphonist and ... Mahler himself was struggling to gain a foothold in Vienna with his symphonies. Since some of the Viennese critics now tactlessly played me off against Mahler, it was an easy matter to suggest to Mahler that I was conspiring against him with the press.’

Symphony No. 1 has a conventional four-movement structure. The imposing opening, *Sehr langsam*, is almost Wagnerian in character, but, as often with Schmidt, there are perceptible traces of the influence of Brahms and Bruckner. It is followed by a sonata-form *Allegro* (*Sehr lebhaft*) featuring lyrical characteristics, typical of Schmidt, while retaining elements of the introduction in the

movement’s main themes. The second movement of the symphony, marked *Langsam*, begins with an effortless and understated shift from the resounding E major to a hushed A flat major. Following this, inventive and subtle harmony firmly establishes the Romantic character of the work. An unforced expressive theme ensues with a flowing accompaniment, before an unexpected return to the main key of the first movement and a new fragmented theme in the horns. Development of this theme and a sequence of climaxes lead to a restful resolution. The third movement, marked *Schnell und leicht*, begins as a rapid scherzo, characterized by a continuous quaver movement. A trio section later in the movement establishes a slower mood in which Schmidt’s lyrical and romantic inclinations dominate, bringing a foretaste of his later mature musical language, with rich textures providing a calming influence. The final movement, *Lebhaft, doch nicht zu schnell*, sees a return to the mood of the first movement, with more than a suggestion of the baroque and now with extensive use of contrapuntal and fugal elements, in which Schmidt shows a considerable level of attainment. The finale also makes use of a ‘chorale’ theme, presented mid-way through the movement in the woodwind and horns. The two are combined and developed before a climax builds to a triumphant coda.

This recording concludes with the *Introduction, Intermezzo and Carnival Music* from Act I of Schmidt’s opera, *Notre Dame*, after Victor Hugo’s novel, *Notre Dame de Paris*, and first produced at the Vienna Court Opera on 1st April, 1914. Events in the opera are suggested in the orchestral excerpts recorded, with recourse to something of a Hungarian gypsy style in the *Intermezzo*, a picture of Esmeralda, the girl who plays a central part in the story. Schmidt’s romantic language is almost completely developed by this point, with little hint of the baroque influences to be found in his *First Symphony*. In their place are distinctive and well-established abilities in harmonic invention, broad sweeping lines, resourceful orchestration and an expansive emotional range. Schmidt’s strong sense of musical unity is also in evidence with disparate sections of his opera coming together with ease while also providing a work of variety.

Adam Binks



Vassily Sinaisky

Vassily Sinaisky's international career was launched in 1973 when he won the Gold Medal at the prestigious Karajan Competition in Berlin. His early work as Assistant to the legendary Kirill Kondrashin at the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, and his study with Ilya Musin at the Leningrad Conservatory provided him with an incomparable grounding. Sinaisky was Music Director and Principal Conductor of Moscow Philharmonic from 1991 to 1996. He has also held the posts of Chief Conductor of the Latvian Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra. He was appointed Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Russian State Orchestra (formerly Svetlanov's USSR State Symphony Orchestra), a position which he held until 2002. He is Chief Guest Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic and is a regular and popular visitor to the BBC Proms each summer. In January 2007 Sinaisky took over as Principal Conductor of the Malmö Symphony Orchestra in Sweden. His appointment forms part of an ambitious new development plan for the orchestra which has already resulted in hugely successful projects both in Sweden and further afield.

Malmö Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1925, the Malmö Symphony Orchestra is a young and vigorous orchestra. For many years dividing its energies between opera and concerts, since 1991 the orchestra has been fully committed to symphonic repertoire, which it performs in its own concert hall. With a complement of a hundred musicians, the orchestra offers an exciting variety of concert programmes to large and enthusiastic audiences. Several recordings have been acclaimed internationally and rewarded with the Cannes Classical Award and Diapason d'Or, with a recording of the Berwald symphonies with Sixten Ehrling receiving a Gramophone Award. The collaboration of the Malmö Symphony Orchestra with Naxos and BIS has done much to enhance its international reputation. Among the orchestra's principal conductors over the years may be mentioned Herbert Blomstedt, Vernon Handley, James DePreist and Paavo Järvi. Vassily Sinaisky was appointed principal conductor in 2007.



Photo by Klas Andersson

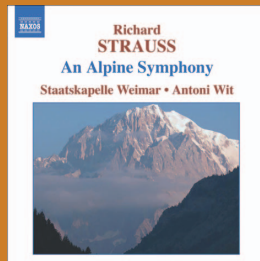
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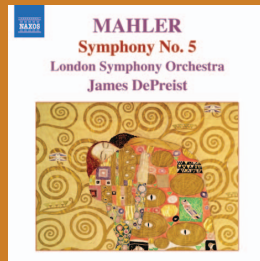
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Franz Schmidt's finely crafted *Symphony No. 1*, grandiose in scale and optimistic in mood, recalls the masterpieces of other great Romantic composers, Brahms, Bruckner and Reger, and won the Beethoven Prize in 1900. His opera *Notre Dame*, based on Victor Hugo's novel, was first staged in Vienna in 1914, and won him an international reputation. Under Vassily Sinaisky the Malmö Symphony Orchestra, whose other Naxos recordings have been highly praised, makes a strong case for the revival of Schmidt's strangely neglected, yet sumptuous and deeply satisfying music.

**Franz
SCHMIDT**
(1874-1939)

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|---|--------------|
| Symphony No. 1 in E major | 45:31 |
| ① Sehr langsam – Sehr lebhaft | 11:37 |
| ② Langsam | 11:25 |
| ③ Schnell und leicht | 11:35 |
| ④ Lebhaft, doch nicht zu schnell | 10:47 |
| Notre Dame – Opera, Op. 2
(Orchestral excerpts, Act 1) | 15:21 |
| ⑤ Introduction | 4:30 |
| ⑥ Interlude | 5:00 |
| ⑦ Carnival Music | 5:51 |



**Malmö Symphony Orchestra
Vassily Sinaisky**

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